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ATONEMENT IN NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS.

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II. THE ATONEMENT OF COMMUNION.

17. UNDERLYING the atoning practices already considered¹ is a state of mind in which gods are regarded as essentially distinct from man. This distinction, of course, does not go so far as to inhibit man from daring to devise means to come to an understanding with them, but the means devised and the spirit which inspires them attribute to the deity such a position above man, or imply such an attitude toward him, as reveals the great gulf which is fixed between them. The divine world is marked off clearly and decidedly from the human world; the inhabitants of the former have entered into certain formal relations with the latter on terms supposed to have been laid down by the gods, or such as are regarded as properly acknowledging their supremacy.

I.

18. But man has not always been so sure about the distinctions between spheres of being to which gods and men belong. In the Babylonian legend, recorded by Berosus, describing how the god Belos "ordered one of the gods to take off his head; and when it was taken off, they were to mix the blood with the soil of the earth, and from thence to form (other) *men and animals*,"² is illustrated a view of the kinship of men and beasts which is common among many primitive peoples. It rests on a fundamental notion of the universe as revealing a unity of life. One interpretation of the world, if not the earliest made by man, at least primitive and powerful, was in terms of man's own volition as manifesting his life. This same principle of life, this

¹ BIBLICAL WORLD, January, 1901, pp. 22-31, "The Atonement of Fear."

² CORY, *Ancient Fragments*, etc., p. 60.

quality of being, he ascribed to all things about and above and beneath him. They, too, had the life which he had, and they were so far his fellows. In this primitive thought all nature is treated as a kindred unity because things have not yet been differentiated into their kinds.³

19. This principle of the unity of life in the primitive world appears in a vast body of phenomena of primitive religion. It affects fundamentally the conception of the divine world, as is shown in the Babylonian legend already quoted. The gods belong to this universe; they partake of this life; they are akin to all other beings in which this life is manifested. According to Berossus the Babylonians believed that gods, men, and beasts were of the same blood. Whether the gods are "divine" or "supreme" beings because they represent this element of life at its maximum, or whether it is the sense of the mysterious and the incomprehensible in their manifestations that differentiates them—in any case they differ in degree, not in quality, from all else, and may therefore belong to any of the spheres of nature, from the sky to the stone, and, wherever appearing, are not regarded as anything else than beings who, however unlike in other respects, are one in essence with the rest of the universe.

20. The concrete forms in which this notion was embodied were especially favored by the primitive organization of human society into kindreds on the basis of the tie of blood. It was in this clan or kin body that the religious ideas and practices given the name of "totemism" appeared. Totemism is the acceptance on the part of a clan, as its gods, of a "class of objects, generally a species of animals or of plants, more rarely a class of inanimate natural objects, very rarely a class of artificial objects."⁴ The ascription of a clan organization to these objects and the alliance with them as supernatural beings involve the recognition of one blood flowing in both parties to the alliance. "Every animal of this kind" (if animal kind it be) "is looked upon as a brother, is treated with the same respect as a

³The sentence is adapted from W. R. SMITH, *Religion of the Semites*, second edition, p. 89. The preceding pages expound the same conception in detail.

⁴FRAZER, *Totemism*, p. 2, or *Ency. Brit.*, s. v.

human clansman, and is believed to aid his human relatives by a variety of friendly services."⁵ But even where totemism did not exist, or had passed away, religious institutions were decidedly modified by the social institutions and ideas, based on kinship and inheriting from the fundamental conception of the unity of life as already described. Gods and men in each larger or smaller association of this sort were a physical unity, indissolubly joined together because of common blood, the gods constituting the parental element, the men the children of their divine ancestors. Common obligations, common principles and rights, based on tribal expectation hardened into custom, were shared in by the divine and human members of the community.⁶

II.

21. This aspect of primitive thought and religion has required so full a statement, both because hitherto it has been largely overlooked or misapprehended, and chiefly since knowledge of it is indispensable to an apprehension of the atonement ideas and practices which are now to be considered. For it is evident that religion in this light assumes the fundamental community of gods and men rather than lays emphasis on their separateness, and that institutions of worship, which objectify and crystallize these human and divine relations, would upon this basis be occupied with the strengthening and renewing of this common element, this life of which both gods and men partake. Divine favor means that the common life is flowing freely from its divine fountain throughout all parts of the organism, and the task of religion is to insure its continuance. Suffering and misfortune indicate that the life-bond is becoming relaxed, and religion must bestir itself to join more closely the weakened ties and revive the waning life-current in the divine-human community. To the practices which arise out of these ideas attention may now be directed.

22. An illustration from Greek religion will serve to present the central element of the praxis and offer a convenient analysis

⁵ W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², p. 124.

⁶ This system is expounded with fulness of illustration in W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², Lecture II.

of its principal forms. The Greek festival of the Thesmophoria, celebrated in October, by women only, was intended to commemorate the descent of Proserpine (or Demeter, the corn-goddess) into the realm of the dead and her return to the upper world. Among other rites it was customary to throw pigs and cakes into sacred caverns, where serpents partly devoured them. Later "the decayed remains of the pigs and cakes" were brought away by consecrated persons and laid on the altar. "Whoever got a piece of the decayed flesh and cakes and sowed it with the seed-corn in his field was believed to be sure of a good crop." In the course of the festival "the women appear also to have eaten swine's flesh."⁷

23. After the conventional and later elements are removed, the fundamental significance of this ceremonial appears to be the following. The pigs were originally the embodiments—the gods, if you like—of the life of the grain, representing this life, its fructifying and abounding element, at the full. As such they are slain, and their flesh performs a double service in the ritual: first, it is buried in the grain-field; second, it is partaken of by the celebrants. The ceremony has for its purpose fertility, fructification; it accomplishes this by the death of the representative of the divine power and thereby the diffusion of the common life, in the one case in the field for an abundant crop, in the other case in the celebrants for the great boon of women, offspring. In sum, therefore, rituals, of which this is one of many, center about the solemn sacramental killing of the god, whereby is made possible for the worshipers, usually by eating the flesh, a communion in the life represented at its maximum in the slain god, and as a result of this communion a renewal and revival of this life in the various spheres of its energizing activity.

24. The sacramental death of the god for the diffusion of life, where the worshipers do not directly partake of the divine body, is illustrated in a variety of sacred ceremonials. Where the deity is from the vegetable world it is often burned to liberate the life. The customs connected with sacred fires in

⁷The language here and there in this description is taken from FRAZER, *The Golden Bough*, II, pp. 45 f., by whom this interpretation of the ritual is given.

many parts of the world, the burning of "an unthreshed sheaf of corn," or of "living trees," are intended to liberate the divine plant life and assure an abundant harvest.⁸ It may be that the burning of the Yule log at Christmas had a similar purpose. The sacred tree may be cut down, or its branches lopped off and carried around from house to house or distributed among the people to obtain fertility and prosperity.⁹

25. Animal gods are killed in circumstances which betray the same circle of ideas. In Transylvania at harvest time "a live cock is bound up in the last sheaf and killed." The feathers are kept to be mixed next spring with the grain from the last sheaf and scattered on the field to be tilled. "Thus the corn-spirit in the form of a cock is killed at harvest, but rises to fresh life and activity in spring."¹⁰ At Rome on the fifteenth of October a horse was sacrificed in the Campus Martius. The tail was cut off and hurried to the Regia, that the blood might fall on the sacred hearth. The head was also severed and hung with loaves; and the citizens of two quarters of the city strove for it, the final possessors being permitted to nail it to one of their buildings. Here again is the slaying of a representative of the spirit of fertility. The securing of his head and tail is the pledge of prosperity for the community for the coming year. It is probable also that the congealed blood from the tail was mixed by the vestals with sacred ashes and used in other ceremonies which had like sacramental purposes.¹¹

26. Among savage peoples human gods were sacrificed with similar ceremonials. The most striking case is obtained from the ritual of the Khonds of Bengal. The person chosen for the sacrifice was "regarded as something more than mortal;" indeed, everything done shows him to be thought of as divine. On the day of the sacrifice all sought to touch the victim; his hair, his spittle, had sovereign virtue. At the killing his flesh was hacked from his body and distributed to all the worshipers, who hastened home with it, where it was rolled in leaves and buried in the field.

⁸ FRAZER, *G. B.*, II, pp. 244 ff.

⁹ PHILPOT, *The Sacred Tree*, p. 91; FRAZER, *G. B.*, I, pp. 62 ff.

¹⁰ FRAZER, *G. B.*, pp. 9 f. ¹¹ FOWLER, *Roman Festivals*, pp. 241 ff., 83.

The bones and remaining parts were burned, and the ashes were scattered over the field, laid as paste over the homes or granaries, or mixed with the new corn. Thus "the flesh and ashes . . . were believed to be endowed with a magical or physical power of fertilizing the land."¹² Rituals of quite the same sort are found among the peoples of Mexico and South America, among the Pawnees of North America and the tribes of Africa.¹³

27. By far the more numerous examples are those in which the slain god is eaten sacramentally by the celebrants, who thus commune directly in the life of the god. This feature of the rite usually takes the form of a sacrificial meal, and as such has left its traces in almost all religions. Thus in the case of vegetable gods, seeds or fruits are eaten in a solemn festival;¹⁴ the worshippers of the sacred tree in northern India chew its leaves or pierce their ears and hang therein a splinter of the tree.¹⁵

28. With respect to the communion feast in the slain animal-god, Mr. Frazer holds that two types are observable. One is that represented by the festival of the bear-god held by the Ainos of Japan, who kill bears as an ordinary means of procuring food and clothing, but who also at stated times perform a religious slaughter of a young bear who has been previously fattened, and hold a sacramental feast on his flesh. The other type is that of the Todas of India, who habitually spare their divine animal, the buffalo, but on rare and solemn occasions, yearly, join in the ceremony of killing and eating a very young male buffalo calf, the only time in which they eat this flesh. Both types rest on the fundamental idea of atonement by communion, the former securing expiation by that means, the latter emphasizing and renewing the divine life in the community.¹⁶ This notion is emphasized baldly in the Arabian feast described by Nilus, where the camel is cut into pieces and at once devoured

¹² FRAZER, *G. B.*, I, pp. 384 ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 381 ff.

¹⁴ An instance of a sacramental rice festival is given in W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*, p. 242, note 3; cf. FRAZER, *G. B.*, II, pp. 71 f.

¹⁵ JEVONS, *Introduction to the History of Religion*, pp. 214, 220.

¹⁶ FRAZER, *G. B.*, II, pp. 90 ff., gives several examples.

raw and warm by the worshipers, though at this period doubtless the camel had ceased to be a divine animal and his blood was offered to the god.¹⁷

29. Of painful significance is the employment of the human victim in these festivals. Happily the majority of cases are among barbarous or semi-barbarous peoples. It is also true that at a very early period this particular form of the rite was abandoned or modified so that the objectionable feature of cannibalism disappeared. Yet the existence of actual observances of the sort, and of ceremonials in which the original rite is vaguely but actually recalled,¹⁸ as well as the *a priori* likelihood that a doctrine accepted in the case of vegetable and animal gods would also have its place in the ritual of sacrifice of the human gods, form a body of evidence for the practice which is irresistible.¹⁹

30. Two other forms of the general principle under consideration (see par. 21) are worthy of brief mention. The first is the widespread practice of killing the divine king. Among not a few savage peoples the king is the god. He is regarded as possessing the divine life among men at its maximum, and therefore in his person are bound up the powers and forces that guarantee the safety and prosperity of his people, if not, indeed, the course of nature and the on-going of the world. Among the Congo peoples their Chitomé was held to be "a god on earth and all-powerful in heaven." "If he were to die a natural death, they thought that the world would perish, and the earth, which he alone sustained by his power and merit, would immediately be annihilated."²⁰ In order, therefore, that this catastrophe

¹⁷ W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², pp. 281 f., 338 f.

¹⁸ The Dionysiac orgies, in which the bull was torn to pieces and devoured by the worshipers, point back to older practices, of which legend has preserved the recollection, in which a human victim was thus treated. (W. R. SMITH, art. "Sacrifice," *Ency. Brit.*, Vol. XXI, Philadelphia edition, p. 145*b*.)

¹⁹ The topic is one which claims a fuller treatment than can be given here; material may be found in W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², pp. 367 f.; FRAZER, *G. B.*, II, pp. 88 f., 218 ff.; JEVONS, *Introduction*, pp. 201 ff.; DE LA SAUSSAYE, *Religionsgeschichte*, English translation, p. 137.

²⁰ FRAZER, *G. B.*, I, p. 113.

might not happen, it was needful that the divine king should be put to death while in the plenitude of his powers, and thus the life be transmitted in its fulness to another, or at least remain in the world among the people over whom the divine king ruled. Thus he was killed sometimes when the first sign of physical weakness appeared, sometimes when in full vigor, after a year's reign. Thus perishing, he left his spirit behind as the creative preserving power, the divine life remaining fructifying and unimpaired to assure the salvation of his people and the world.²¹

31. The second instance is that in which the worshiper secures participation in the divine life by placing himself, or something intimately connected with himself, in immediate physical contact with deity. Thus the branches of tree-gods are filled with bits of rags or pieces of clothing; their trunks have nails and pins stuck into them; into sacred wells pins are thrown, or clothing is deposited near them; in the crevices of the cave of the Dictæan Zeus in Crete are hidden innumerable objects of all sorts.²² These practices were common all over the world. Both the hair and nails were favorite means to this end; they grow visibly; they reveal life unmistakably. Hence, cut off, they form appropriate objects to lay on the shrine of the god. It is possible that the true explanation of at least some of the cuttings of the flesh assigned to another principle (see par. 11) really belong here.²³ The blood as representing life is applied to the altar or the idol to strengthen the life-bond. Such indeed is most probably the deepest meaning of all these acts. "My shirt or stocking, or a rag to represent it, placed upon a sacred bush, or thrust into a sacred well . . . or a nail from my hand driven into the trunk of the tree . . . is thenceforth in continual contact with divinity; and the effluence of divinity,

²¹ MACDONALD, *Religion and Myth*, chap. iv; FRAZER, *G. B.*, I, p. 228. Another, but less satisfactory, interpretation of this custom is given by JEVONS, *Introduction*, pp. 291 ff.

²² A fact stated in an unpublished lecture by Professor Louis Dye, of Oxford.

²³ For in some cases it is not the suffering that is the important thing in the rite; cf. W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*, p. 337.

reaching and involving it, will reach and involve me. In this way I may become permanently united with the god."²⁴

III.

32. Enough has been presented in the preceding paragraphs to show the general character of this ritual whose purpose was atoning in the large sense already accepted by us. The distinguishing features of it are two. First, the atonement is wrought by communion with the god, which results in the renewal of the life-bond that binds together the community, human and divine, and pours a new flood of vitality throughout the whole body. This may be conceived of in a purely objective and impersonal fashion, as a necessary element of the community's life, to be performed at stated intervals.²⁵ Or, as the personality of deity became emphasized and the god's independent attitude toward his worshipers was held in view, the ceremonial would have as its purpose his "reconciliation" with his people by the same process. Disaster of any sort—failure of crops, drought, plague, defeat in war—would be interpreted as the weakening of the life-bond, the strengthening of which, by a communion sacrifice, was equivalent to the reestablishment of harmony between the alienated parties. What is true of the Semitic ritual here is true of all such rituals—"the notions of communion and atonement are bound up together, atonement being simply an act of communion, designed to wipe out all memory of previous estrangement."²⁶

33. The second feature is the striking one suggested in preceding paragraphs—that the atoning work is wrought by the deity himself; the human is the recipient, is secondary, almost passive, in the presence of the energy of the divine life, achieving reconciliation by its own superabounding effluence. In further confirmation of this interpretation of the praxis the attitude

²⁴ HARTLAND, *The Legend of Perseus*, II, pp. 214 f. Chap. xi of this volume contains a very full discussion of these practices. Cf. also W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², pp. 320 ff.

²⁵ Thus among certain Indian tribes the sacred animal is eaten, body and blood, once a year. (W. R. SMITH, art. "Sacrifice" in *Ency. Brit.*)

²⁶ W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², p. 320.

of the celebrants is significant. As one element may be mentioned the gloom and sadness which characterize the preparation for the divine sacrifice and its celebration. Such was the case in the killing of the bear by the Ainos, of the buffalo by the Todas, and of the ram by the Egyptians.²⁷ While the victim must die, those who slay him recognize the horror of the deed. Do they desire to escape responsibility for it? No doubt. Yet it is not impossible also that they wish to emphasize the fact that they are only accessories, instruments, to bring about what the deity himself would have. Certainly this is suggested by the endeavor to induce the victim to go willingly to his death, illustrated in the details of some rituals. Thus the oxen to be sacrificed to Zeus at Athens were driven round the altar, on which lay wheat or barley cakes, and the ox which stopped and ate of the cakes was regarded as having offered himself for the sacrifice.²⁸ The requirement, sometimes made, that the whole community take part in the killing, as when each one must cast a stone at the victim,²⁹ may have in view the general participation in the benefit coming from the death as well as the common liability in causing it. The essential thing is the divine submission to death whereby life is renewed in the people. So the Khonds (see par. 26) comforted one of their number, whose child had been thus sacrificed as a divine victim, saying: "Your child has died that all the world may live."³⁰

34. While one cannot help a strange feeling of surprise in recognizing so early in human history this type of religion, he cannot wonder at the power with which it laid hold upon the early world, and the persistence with which it continued to appear in later periods, when other forms of cult and other religious

²⁷ FRAZER, *G. B.*, pp. 102, 137; SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², p. 431.

²⁸ W. R. SMITH, *Rel. Sem.*², p. 309 and *note*.

²⁹ JEVONS, *Introduction*, pp. 255, 292.

³⁰ FRAZER, *G. B.*, I, p. 385. It is interesting to observe that the god who dies is thought of as coming to life again after his death and by virtue of it. His death sets free the life which revivifies himself. Thus in the Buphonia at Athens we are told that "the dead was raised again in the same sacrifice;" the flesh was tasted, the animal's skin was stuffed, and so life was diffused. Cf. art. "Sacrifice" in *Ency. Brit.*, p. 145*b*.

ideals were in the ascendant. It appealed to the higher elements of human nature, to the slumbering, but always living, consciousness of oneness with the divine. Hope and trust, confidence and assurance, were religious qualities encouraged by it. The fundamental mysteries of life and death were at its heart, and the victory of the divine life in death was its supreme note. The realism of its cult kept all these features living, clear, and impressive. Its weakness lay in the fact that its conception of life was limited to the physical. The blood-bond was materially conceived, and the god whose communion was sought shared in the lower, rather than the higher, life of his worshipers. Thus the sense of sin, on the one hand, and of divine moral purpose, on the other, was weak. The conception of holiness was largely naturalistic. Hence came its crudity and grossness of conception. Its very realistic character intensified its weaker side, and with the growth of society into higher forms and ideals it lost its hold. That it was capable of progress will be seen by its revival in connection with later religion. So near are some of its elements to fundamental realities of the highest types of religion that W. Robertson Smith can say: "The voluntary death of the divine victim, which we have seen to be a conception not foreign to ancient sacrificial ritual, contained the germ of the deepest thought in the Christian doctrine: the thought that the Redeemer gives himself for his people."³¹

³¹ *Rel. Sem.*, first edition, p. 393, omitted in second edition; cf. also an appreciative, if somewhat less sympathetic, comment in SCOTT, *Sacrifice, Its Prophecy and Fulfilment*, p. 72.